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PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EDUCATIONAL ASPECTS OF
BILINGUALISM. AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE ROMANIAN
EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

**Psychological and educational aspects of bilingualism. An opportunity for the Romanian
educational practice and research**

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Abstract

Bilingualism is a topic widely recognized in educational research and strategically considered in the context of European Union's Lisbon strategy. Numerous theories now converge towards framing a discipline known as developmental psycholinguistic. The research is still young but the results and effects of the second language learning go beyond the individual and impact on the society. Most research on second language acquisition comes, in an overwhelming proportion, from the USA. Romania benefits from a unique blend of minority groups speaking native languages different from Romanian. The Romanian education system is in a fortunate position to analyze and research the characteristics of second language acquisition for ethnic groups such as the Hungarian minority, the German minority, or the Roma minority. The present paper describes a selection of potential areas of research. The results for the educational research and the integration within the European educational policies are straightforward.

Key-terms: bilingualism, multilingualism, multiculturalism, second language acquisition, minorities, action-research

Zusammenfassung

Zweisprachigkeit ist eine breite erkannte Thema in der pädagogische Forschung und sie ist betrachtet strategisch im Kontext der Europäische Union in Lisabon. Es gibt zahlreiche Theorien auf der Konzipierung einer Disziplin als Entwicklung- psycholinguistische Konvertierung. Die Forschung ist noch Jung, aber die Ergebnisse und Wirkungen der zweiten Sprachenlernen geht über die individuellen und hat Auswirkungen auf die Gesellschaft. Die meistens Forschungsarbeiten kommen aus der USA. Rumänien profitiert von eine einzigartige Mischung von Minderheiten und sprechen verschiedene Muttersprache. Das Rumänische Bildungssystem ist in der glückliche Lage zu analysieren, forschen die Eigenschaften des Zweitspracherwerbs für ethnische Gruppen wie die ungarische, deutsche und Roma Minderheit. Unsere Arbeit beschreibt eine Auswahl von möglichen Bereichen der Forschung. Die Ergebnisse für die Bildungsforschung und die Integration innerhalb der Europäischen Bildungspolitik sind unkompliziert.

Schlagwörter: Zweisprachigkeit, Mehrsprachigkeit, Multikulturalität, Zweitspracherwerbs, Minderheiten, Action-Forschung

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Introduction

Speaking more than one language is an increasingly common feature of people in developing and developed countries across the world. Multiethnic work or learning places, career advancement requirements, the spread in the diversity of information sources, and ever so many other factors, relate to an increase in the number of people speaking more than one language. It is usually the language of the ethnic origin, or the language of the nation in which the individual resides, that the individual learns first. However, having a family whose ethnic language differs from the majority of the population, more often than not, requires that the individual learn both languages. Thus, the individual may, and indeed, often does, perform a dual role, to speak his or her native language within the family or the close community, and speak the language of the majority population when performing tasks in society, outside his or her familial surroundings.

If once regarded as a normal, self-understood, social objective, learning more than one's native language is now becoming the focus of educational research and educational policy analysis, due to its vast implications on the efficacy and efficiency of the individual's learning in a second language. In addition to the effects upon the individual, the school and the society themselves have to recognize the importance of minority groups languages upon the societal developments. Small communities, speaking languages different than the majority population, fight to preserve their cultural identity. Their language is often a vector and a guardian of their cultural inheritance as well as a tool for promoting their social values.

Albeit using it as a starting point and recognizing its significance, this paper is not about the importance and the effects of minority populations' languages, but, rather about the opportunities that arise for the educational research in a country rich with various minority ethnic groups. Minorities of Hungarian, German, and other descent, live for hundreds of years in Romania. Their children learn Romanian as a second language, whilst speaking their first language at home or within their ethnic communities. Given the objectives of formal education which include preparing the individual for an efficient social functioning, Romanian education

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must include amongst its research interests the acquisition of Romanian as a second language within its minority groups. As part of the Lisbon strategy, the early learning of (foreign) languages is now one of the key-areas for action in educational praxis and systems, announced in the Commission Communicate “Working together for Growth and Jobs – a new start for the Lisbon strategy” (COM(2005)/24, 2005), and in the “Integrated Guidelines for Growth and Jobs (2005-2008)(COM(2005)/0141, 2005).

The bilingualism in today’s research.**Pathways to becoming bilingual**

Bilingualism can be encountered in almost all countries in the world, in all social classes, and in all ages. There are empirical evidence from fundamental research showing significant cognitive, communicational and cultural advantages of bilingualism (August & Hakuta, 1997; Baker, 2000). The benefits for communication include broader communication networks, literacy in two or more languages, enhanced metalinguistic abilities. The cultural benefits encompass increased enculturation, deeper levels of multiculturalism and enriched perspectives on life, greater tolerance and sensibility to language, race and culture differences. Cognitively, bilingualism brings about increased cognitive functioning, greater number of cognitive pathways, and improved memory and cerebral plasticity. The socio-emotional benefits reside in greater self-esteem and sense of identity while last, but not least, the socio-economic results include increased levels of educational performance, better chances of work placement for adults, and better opportunities for increased revenues.

In relation to bilingualism, the second language acquisition is the process in which an individual acquires a second language in addition to the native language. Today, the second language acquisition (2LA) represents one of the objects of study for the applied linguistics. Most empirical evidence regarding 2LA comes from the USA, which is a very fertile ground for research, due to the great diversity of inhabitant minorities. In Europe, the most notable examples are Czech and Slovak speakers, and Flemish and French speakers in Belgium.

There are three main pathways for an individual to become bilingual: simultaneous, successive, or, receptively. A number of factors come into play in determining the pathway,

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amongst which, key-factors are thought to be the age of exposure to the two languages, the type, and the intensity of exposure. If both the schooling environment and the familial environment value bilingualism, it is highly probable that the child learns and masters both languages with high levels of proficiency (Winsler, Díaz, Espinosa, & Rodríguez, 1999).

The exposure to more than one language during early childhood can facilitate the transference from speaking and utilizing the maternal language to the 2LA. This is known as a trans-linguistic transference. Two main hypotheses try to explain the trans-linguistic transfer: *the interdependence hypothesis* and the *critical stage hypothesis*, both developed and refined by James Cummins and by Cummins et al., respectively, (James Cummins, 1979a, 1979b, 1991; Jim Cummins, Harley, Swain, & Allen, 1990; Harley, Cummins, Swain, & Allen, 1990). Numerous theories, such as the *intake theory* and the *affective filter hypothesis* (Krashen, 1981), the *output theory* (Swain, 1993), and many others, tried to further the scientific understanding of the second language acquisition.

Factors impacting 2LA

In a recent report redacted for the European Union, Blondin et al. (1998), differentiates between societal, school (or system-related), teaching (or teacher-related), and person-specific factors. From an educational psychology perspective, the factors posing the most immediate interest are the student-related factors, closely accompanied by the teacher- or teaching-related factors. In an even more specialized approach, the developmental psycholinguistics becomes interested in 2LA as far as the empirical data provide that there are differences in cerebral or neural organization between L1 and L2 according to the learning age, type of learning, or level of expertise. Most recent reviews support that the acquisition age is influential upon the neural organization of most learners (Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 71).

Age. One of the most common preconceptions is that the younger the learner, the more efficient the 2LA is. Nevertheless, as valid as it may appear, the empirical data is still conflicting and the verdict is still out. This may have to do more with the operational definitions of 2LA efficiency than to a true paradoxical conclusion or an impossibility to conclude. More specifically, the efficiency may be defined both as an *initial rate of learning* and as a *final*

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learning performance. As far as the first definition is concerned, the older learners seem more efficient, contrary to the common sense hypothesis that the younger the learner, the better. With respect to the second operational definition of success / efficiency of 2LA, the data support the idea that younger learner are more proficient.

Table 1: Age differences in 2LA (Birdsong 1999; Scovel 2000; Singleton 2001, apud Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 84)

Younger age advantages	Older age advantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neural plasticity • Non-analytical • Less inhibited (usually) • Low group identity • Higher likelihood of simplified input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning capacity • Analytical abilities • Pragmatic abilities • Better L1 knowledge • Life experience/knowledge

A very interesting observation regarding the *critical period* is made by Paradis (2004), according to whom the critical period hypothesis (CPI) is applicable to implicit linguistic knowledge, whereas the decline in procedural memory forces learners who start their L2 later, to focus on explicit learning, which results in utilizing a different cognitive system than that underpinning the native language and, thus, older students rely more on metalinguistic and pragmatic knowledge (Paradis, 2004, p. 59).

The main debate about the CPI is establishing if there is a either a critical threshold or a continuous decrease which characterizes 2LA. Some empirical data support the lack of a discontinuity and a constant decrease in efficiency in 2LA (Chiswick, Lee, & Miller, 2004; Hakuta, Bialystok, & Wiley, 2003).

Thus, the empirical data show an interesting and challenging situation, as far as first and second language acquisition are two distinct processes sharing a series of commonalities, but which also differ in several important aspects. Acquiring and performing in the first (or native) language is usually successful, unproblematic, with the notable exception of special cases, i.e. cognitive or neurological deficits. However, 2LA is extremely diverse, as a result of a

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combination of motivational, cultural and societal factors. Similarly, the starting age for the first language acquisition is relatively irrelevant and may be assumed as beginning immediately after birth, whereas the starting of 2LA is different both for the individual and for the educational system. Therefore, important questions arise, such as what is the determining factor in 2LA. Is it the starting age or the intensity of exposure to the first language? Why, while all aspects are equally developed for the first language, it is common for 2L students to have greater difficulties in pronunciation than in syntax (apud Herschensohn, 2007, p. 3)?

Gender. The majority of research regarding the relation between gender and 2LA focused on cognitive style or learning strategies. The empirical data show higher performance for women than for men in certain tests of verbal fluency (such as identification of words starting with a certain letter), and a lesser cerebral/cortical asymmetry in women's brain as far as the speech is considered (Kimura, 1992, apud. Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 84). Further interesting empirical data show that women appear to be more efficient in memorizing complex forms while men are more efficient in composition rules (Halpern, 2000, apud. Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 84).

Aptitudes/Skills. It is easy to grasp the ubiquity of the assumption that there exists a specific talent of language learning. Carroll (1965) even proposed four constitutive elements of this talent, which underpin most linguistic aptitudes tests: 1) phonemic coding, 2) inductive learning of language, 3) grammatical sensibility, and 4) associative memory capacity. The significance for pedagogy and didactics is rather immediate: be there such an aptitude, not dissimilar to intelligence, one may differentiate between students and predict those with more chances to succeed. The earliest fundamental research aiming at finding and isolating such an aptitude showed a remarkable stability in the individuals' ability to learn across the lifespan (Carroll and Sapon, 1959; Carroll, 1981; Skehan, 1989; apud. Dörnyei, 2005, p. 45). Nonetheless, further research nuanced the existence of a general ability in 2LA. More specifically, very young children presented strong correlations with memory components, while for elder students the biggest influence was the analysis capacities, which suggests that the nature of the relation aptitude-result change with age (Harley și Hart, 1997; Harley și Hart, 2002; apud. Dörnyei, 2005, p. 45). **Atențional control**

Table 2: 2LA stages and the corresponding skills (Skehan, 2002; apud. Dörnyei, 2005, p. 62)

2LA Stage	Corresponding ability/skill
Input processing strategies, i.e. segmenting /chunking	Attentional control Working memory
Noticing	Phonetic coding ability Working memory
Pattern identification	Phonetic coding ability Working memory Grammatical sensibility Inductive language learning ability
Pattern manipulation and restructuring	Grammatical sensibility Inductive language learning ability
Pattern control	Automation Integrative memory
Pattern integration	Chunking Memory retrieval

Motivation. A factor commonly summoned to explain the success in 2LA is individual motivation. The motivation determines in a significant degree the levels of effort which an individual employs in various stages of 2LA, and is often the key to achieve high level of expertise in 2LA. Most often, the term *motivation* includes: 1) relevant goals / needs; 2) a desire to achieve the goal; 3) the perception that 2LA is relevant for achieving the goal or fulfilling the need; 4) the belief in success (or failure) in 2LA; and 5) the assigned/allocated value of various results/outcomes (Oxford și Ehrman 1993; Dörnyei 2001, apud. Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 85).

A model with particular relevance for the educational psychology, in particular, and for the pedagogy, in general, is the Dörnyei-Ottó model of motivation for 2LA. The model distinguishes between several distinct temporal sequences, organized alongside their progress from *intentions* and *desires* up to *goals* and later to *operationalized intentions*, which are *put in application* and, sometimes, lead towards goals achievement, finalizing with the process' *evaluation*. The authors separate the model into three distinct phases or stages: 1) a pre-actional

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phase; 2) an actional phase, and 3) a post-actional phase. The educational implications of the model are relatively straightforward, and reside in the instructional design of motivational strategies alongside the progress identified by the model: 1) generating basic motivational conditions / prerequisites, 2) generating the initial motivation, 3) maintaining and preserving the motivation, 4) encouragement of positive retrospective self-evaluation (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 111).

Discussions

Today's research in bilingualism relate extensively both to psycholinguistics and to educational psychology. Results and theories from various fields, including cognitive psychology, and neuropsychology, broaden our understanding of the mechanisms at play in the acquisition of second languages. Still, many questions remain open, including but not limited to, the validity of a critical threshold in age, the gender differences, and the existence and weighing of a general language learning aptitude or linguistic aptitude, and other interindividual differences that may account for the various rates of acquisition and proficiency in second language. Romania is one of the countries with a high potential of learning about the second language acquisition. Ethnic groups of various descents, including those of German, Hungarian, and roma descents, live within Romania's geographic borders and still preserve a strong sense of cultural and ethnical identity. Their native languages are a powerful vector for this identity. At the same time, children learning both a native language and a second language can benefit from knowledge and experiences broader than those speaking a single language. They can communicate more and with more people and can access richer cultural sources. The school may benefit from recognizing and valuating their particular linguistic profile, while the educational research may benefit from access to important research questions.

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